

Record of Decision

Revised Land and Resource Management Plan Rio Grande National Forest

Final Environmental Impact Statement
Revised Land and Resource Management Plan
USDA - Forest Service
Rio Grande National Forest

Includes the State of Colorado

Includes the Counties of Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, Mineral, Rio Grande, Saguache, Hinsdale, Custer, San Juan, and Archuleta.

This document presents the decision regarding the selection a Revised Land and Resource Management Plan for the Rio Grande National Forest. It summarizes the reasons for choosing the Selected Alternative as the basis for the Forest Plan which will be followed for the next 10 to 15 years. Estimates of the long-term environmental and economic consequences contained in the Final Environmental Impact Statement have been considered in this decision.

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INTRODUCTION

This Nation as a whole should earnestly desire to leave the next generation the National honor unstained and the National Resources unexhausted...

—Theodore Roosevelt, 1908

In some respects, things have not changed much since 1908. We feel the same obligation to future generations that Theodore Roosevelt felt so strongly about at the beginning of this century. I consider this plan to be a contract with the present as well as a promise to the future. I fully expect this Forest Plan to be the foundation for the next steps we all take toward intelligent and responsible multiple use of National Forest resources as we move on into the next century.

The Forest is large (1.8 million acres) and is essentially undeveloped. Only about an eighth of the entire Forest has had timber harvest and road construction. The undeveloped character of the Forest is somewhat unique and biologically and socially important. It serves as a biological reserve for many plant and animal species. It also offers a wide range of recreation opportunities that are available year round, as well as a unique setting which helps diversify the local economy. We anticipate that over the next decade, more people will discover the Rio Grande and compete for its resources. It is critically important for the Forest Service to protect the unique qualities of the Rio Grande while serving the public demand for both commodities and recreation.

The preservation of future options for the next generations is well founded in law. The Forest Service (and all federal agencies) are expected to lead the way toward a healthy relationship between people and their natural surroundings. We must be aware of the interactions between our activities and the subtle consequences of those interactions. In that light, the Congress clearly expects the Forest Service to monitor and evaluate the effects of management actions on the productivity of the land. For this reason, I consider monitoring this Forest Plan to be a critical component.

This Forest Plan Revision evolved around a concept recognizing that National Forests are ecosystems and that management of them to produce goods and services requires an awareness and consideration of the interrelationships among humans, plants, animals, soil, water, air, and other environmental factors within the ecosystems. This concept is important to a lot of people. One of the first things we heard in the public-involvement process was one person's plea that we "not lose sight of the science" as we make the various decisions in the Plan. Another said, "People are part of ecosystems; don't forget that." This Plan encompasses both the science and the needs of people. I selected an alternative that will manage the Forest in a manner that is sensitive to economic efficiencies, while being responsive to changing conditions of the land and its resources and to changing social and economic demands of the American people.

I believe that land productivity is an intricate tapestry of interconnected relationships and processes. One leads to the next in an unbroken cycle. I believe, too, that many of our past actions have either oversimplified or completely overlooked the systemic implications of our management.

We are embracing the concept of adaptive management in this Revised Forest Plan. Viewed from a strategic perspective this means that:

*When faced with two or more paths, each with its certainties and unknowns, we will take the one that will allow us to shift to another path if our initial decision doesn't take us closer to the achievement of the Forest Plan Goals and Objectives.

*We will make decisions that leave future generations with as many options as possible.

I would like to add some rigor to our understanding of the current conditions of resources entrusted to the Forest Service, and the consequences of management practices. I have directed that a monitoring-and-evaluation process be implemented that displays the implications of our decisions and activities. To accomplish this, I make the pledge to you, that I am emphasizing Monitoring and Evaluation and asking that it get top priority as work plans are developed each year.

I believe that some degree of "unknowing" has to be accepted if we are to progress. Intuition and extrapolation are both valued qualities in professional life. There is much to be learned from careful observation and expansive research. We do not have to prove everything on-site before it becomes a part of our operational norm.

The Forest has conducted considerable public participation in the development of the Revised Plan. Public views have textured the Plan significantly. We asked, we listened, we evaluated, and we tested the concepts, and the Plan is improved by the ideas suggested by the public. As a public-land management agency, our desire is to be a good neighbor, to do our part in the various communities in and around the San Luis Valley. I am confident that this is evident in the selected alternative.

I know that not everyone is content with my decision. It has been my experience that many people "generally" accept the concept of multiple use^{3/4}as long as their favored use comes first and receives the most emphasis. We believe that this Plan meets our moral, ethical, and legal obligations to the people and the environment that surrounds them. We have not been able to do everything that was suggested by the public; that would be impossible. We did, however, listen, and we paid close attention to, and used, the ideas and concepts that people shared with us.

The Forest Supervisor, the District Rangers, the Planning Team, and I have all struggled mightily with the possible human consequences of this Plan. Industries and lifestyles will be impacted by this decision. Unfortunately, we can't always buffer people from the adjustments that are needed in order to stay within the limits of sustainable production, nor can we offer unlimited opportunities to all people for each specific use. We have to keep looking to the future.

The philosophical foundation for the development of this Plan adhered to the following obligations:

- *Protect and enhance soil productivity.
- *Produce high-quality water.
- *Protect the biodiversity of the Forest to ensure a biologically healthy and sustainable Forest in the future.
- *Harvest the bounty (interest) from the forest (principal) for community sustenance and stability.

This leads to the "rule of thumb" which is the basic premise of ecological conservation: the land should retain as much of its original membership as is compatible with human land-use.

—Leopold, 1944

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT CONDUCTED

The Rio Grande National Forest has conducted an extensive public involvement process that is ongoing. Initially, issues and concerns were identified by the Planning staff after reviewing environmental documents on file, letters from the public, and conversations with other Forest personnel. These issues were taken to the public and built upon. Eventually they evolved into the Revision Topics.

An initial set of public meetings was held in 1992 in the four towns where Ranger District offices were located, and at Chama, New Mexico. From these meetings, four public work groups were chosen by the public to represent various National Forest users (the people from Chama and La Jara went into one group). These groups have met a total of 26 times, including nine field trips. They helped refine the issues, brainstorm potential solutions to issues, and develop a preliminary range of themes for the alternatives. The public at large has been kept informed of the Forest Plan Revision process through a series of newsletters and news releases. Our mailing list includes more than 1,500 persons and organizations.

Public involvement and issue identification were carried on throughout Colorado at a series of 18 public meetings from November 1993 to January 1994. The preliminary alternatives and Revision Topics were presented at meetings in Denver, Boulder, Salida, Saguache, Monte Vista (three meetings), La Jara, Alamosa, Antonito, Chama, Durango, Pagosa Springs, South Fork, Creede, Del Norte, and Center. Over 600 people attended the meetings. Discussions were

lively, opinions diverse, and the level of interest in the Forest Plan Revision high. There was significant comment on the range of alternatives, and they were revised to reflect these comments. Another series of meetings was held after the publication of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement. These meetings were held to answer questions about the information in the Draft, or to clarify the information presented. Additional meetings have been held with interest groups (environmental, motorized and nonmotorized recreationists, timber industry, and others). To date, the Forest Planning staff have participated in over 100 public meetings and talked to a couple of thousand people face to face.

Forest Planning Staff have coordinated with other Federal agencies, the Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and Natural Resources Conservation Service; and various state agencies, including the Department of Natural Resources and the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Staff also coordinated with or requested reviews from the Rocky Mountain Forest and Experiment Station and various colleges, including the University of Wyoming, the University of Colorado at Boulder, Adams State College in Alamosa, and Ft. Lewis College in Durango.

A special effort has been made to contact the Hispanic people, who comprise almost 50% of the San Luis Valley population. Most Hispanic-owned businesses are on the mailing list. Roman Catholic priests throughout the San Luis Valley have helped find key Hispanic persons to include on the mailing list. Due to a newspaper article soliciting Hispanic involvement, two meetings were held with Hispanic groups in Monte Vista and Center, Colorado.

Another special effort has been made to establish a mutual and beneficial partnership with American Indians. The purpose of this effort was to gain understanding of each other; honor American Indian treaty rights; be sensitive to traditional religious beliefs and customs; and provide research, technology, and other technical assistance to American Indian governments.

To carry out these partnerships, four councils were established in the Rocky Mountain Region. The Southwest Council consists of representatives from the Hopi, the Jicarilla Apache, the All-Indian Pueblo Council, the Navajo, the Southern Ute, the Uinta and Ouray Ute, and the Ute Mountain Ute. This group is working with the San Juan and Rio Grande National Forests. Representatives of the Intermountain and Southwest Regions of the Forest Service, and other federal agencies, attend meetings regularly, though they are not official members of the Council.

After the publication of the DEIS and Draft Revised Plan, there was a 120-day public-comment period. The RGNF received over 800 individual letters that contained over 5,000 individual comments. The RGNF Supervisor and Forest Planner have read each of those letters, and the planning staff has responded to them (see FEIS, Appendix N). Many changes were made as a result of these comments (including the development of the selected alternative).

THE DECISION

This Record of Decision describes the Land and Resource Management Plan for the Rio Grande National Forest and my choice to **select Alternative G for implementation**, and my reasons for that decision. Alternative G is a refinement of the Preferred Alternative (D) and Alternative E that were identified in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement published in July 1995. I am selecting Alternative G because it positions the Forest well to meet the current demands for forest products, services, intrinsic values, and to honor our commitment to leave options for future generations.

Alternative G is a logical outgrowth of the alternative development and public involvement parts of the Forest Plan Revision process. The point was made, by the Forest Service, throughout the public involvement process that the Final (selected) alternative would likely be based on a combination of two or more of the existing alternatives. Alternative G is a combination of alternatives D and E. There are no elements or features in Alternative G that were not included or addressed in the original range of the alternatives. There are two important points that need to be recognized. These are:

1. Alternative G (selected) is within the range of alternatives that the public could reasonably anticipate that the Forest Service consider, and;
2. The public's comments on the alternatives in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement also apply to Alternative G and meaningfully inform the Forest Service of the Public's attitudes toward Alternative G. Indeed, Alternative G was developed because of the comments received on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

Alternative G complies with Judge Finesilver's Decision (Civic Action 87-F-1714) of 1989. Specifically:

*The Soil Resource Inventory has been updated and used in the definition of the Suitable Land Base that is included in the Forest Plan.

*The suitability analysis has been done in a totally different way than that done for the 1985 Plan. Documentation of the process is on file and is considered adequate for compliance with the Decision.

In order to implement this Forest Plan Revision, the Rio Grande Forest Supervisor will issue a separate Record of Decision for Travel Management that designates all Forest trails as either motorized or nonmotorized. Motorized trails are marked on the Alternative G Management-Area Prescription map.

Alternative G includes the adoption of the Outfitter-Guide Capacities identified in Appendix C of the Final Environmental Impact Statement. The moratorium on Outfitter-Guides is no longer in effect when this Plan is implemented (refer to the Implementation schedule in this document).

A Forest Plan for this National Forest, as well as each Forest in the National Forest System, is required by the rules implementing the *Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974* (RPA), as amended by the *National Forest Management Act of 1976* (NFMA). The purpose of the Forest Plan is to provide for multiple use and sustained yield of goods and services from National Forest System lands in an environmentally sound manner. NFMA implementing regulations at 36 CFR Part 219.10(g) require that a forest plan be revised on a 10-year cycle, or at least every 15 years.

As provided in 36 CFR 219.10(g), this decision will remain in effect until the Plan is revised, which is scheduled to be in 10 years but no longer than 15 years. In the FEIS, a 50-year planning period is used so that effects of alternative choices can be projected beyond the first decade. Short-term opportunities, problems, or conflicts may arise in managing the Forest that were not anticipated in the Plan Revision. When this occurs, the Plan can be adjusted through re-scheduling, amending, or revising.

As a management strategy for the Rio Grande National Forest, this Revised Plan and FEIS are programmatic. The emphasis in the Plan is not on site-specific decisions. Rather, it provides overall systematic guidance and establishes management direction to govern future actions.¹

The original Forest Plan was adopted in 1985. The Revised Plan makes many changes to the original Plan. These changes are needed to address issues and concerns about how the Forest should be managed.

Public involvement/collaboration is ongoing. The RGNF subscribes to the philosophy of "fish bowl" planning. There are no secrets, and the door is always open to those interested in coming in to talk. The Forest Planning process is subject to the requirements of the *Federal Advisory Committee Act* (FACA). The Act requires that the public, across the board, be given equal opportunity to comment on the Plan and the process. The RGNF Planning Staff has listened to all points of view and has incorporated good ideas. The Forest Service retains the responsibility for the analysis of the alternatives, and for the identification of the selected alternative. I am confident that you will see that the staff has listened, and that your involvement in this process has been worth the effort.

DECISIONS AND REASONS FOR THE DECISION

This Record of Decision (ROD) explains the rationale and basis for my decision to select Alternative G for implementation, and to approve the Revised Rio Grande National Forest Land

¹As an example, the Rio Grande National Forest has issued a separate Record of Decision dealing with motorized and nonmotorized trail designations in the Backcountry. Rather than Segregate uses, the Forest opted to manage the trail system to offer motorized or nonmotorized recreation opportunities.

and Resource Management Plan. The factors I considered were derived from the issues, concerns and opportunities identified through the initial planning process, as well as from the public comments received on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Draft Revised Forest Plan.

There are six fundamental decisions made in a Forest Plan. These include:

- 1.The establishment of Forestwide Goals and Objectives.
- 2.The establishment of Forestwide Standards and Guidelines.
- 3.The establishment of Management-Area direction.
- 4.The Plan designates suitable timber land and establishes an allowable sale quantity of timber (ASQ). It also identifies the level of timber we expect to be able to produce, based on experienced budget levels. The Plan designates land suitable for grazing and browsing. It identifies the land that is suitable and available for oil and gas leasing. It provides for a broad range of outdoor recreation opportunities.
- 5.The Plan establishes the minimum legal requirements for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the Revised Plan.
- 6.Based on a review of unroaded areas, it does not recommend to Congress any areas for Wilderness study. The Plan identifies fourteen streams that are considered eligible for inclusion in the National Wild and Scenic River System. The Plan also includes the designation of six Research Natural Areas, and Special Interest Areas.

Alternative G is selected based on a combination of Goals and Objectives, Standards and Guidelines, Management Area direction and the way the alternative addresses the Revision Topics. The Revision Topics are:

- 1.Biological Diversity
- 2.Wilderness, Unroaded, and Other Special Area Considerations
- 3.Timber Management and Suitability
- 4.Recreation and Travel Management
- 5.Oil and Gas Leasing

Key decision factors are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Decision 1.The Establishment of Forestwide Multiple-Use Goals and Objectives

These Goals and Objectives are listed in Chapter II of the Revised Plan. These are listed in accordance with the planning regulations at 36 CFR 219.11(b). All Forest Goals and Objectives are tiered to the Regional Goals identified in The Rocky Mountain Regional Guide, as amended May 1992; technical correction, June 1996.

The Goals and Objectives would apply to any of the alternatives, however, each alternative achieves them in a different way, depending on the emphasis of the alternative. I would refer the reader to the comparison of alternatives in Chapter 2 of the FEIS.

With regard to the Goals and Objective here is how the Alternatives compare:

Alternative NA is an expression of past management philosophy. The alternative is focused more on the "pieces" of the Forest rather than the "whole". The alternative attempts to provide direction of some of the components of biological diversity, but clearly, the goals and objectives are focused on economic values.

Alternatives B's and D's emphasis is on resource production (within the limits of ecosystem sustainability). While the alternatives do offer more balance, they are focused more toward the achievement of the Goals and Objectives that are based on economic values.

Alternative A leans heavily toward the function of natural processes with little or no human intervention. Alternative F is based on the concept of "island biogeography". Both alternatives emphasize the Goals and Objectives that center around resource protection and maintenance of biological diversity. Neither alternative emphasizes the achievement of the Goals and Objectives that are oriented toward economic values.

Alternative E begins to get at a balance between biological and economic Goals and Objectives. The alternative is based on the concept of no additional development of the Forest.

I chose Alternative G because it is a good balance between protecting ecological processes for future generations and offering goods and services for current users. The alternative is similar also to alternative D in that it offers a level of goods and services that support the Forest's role in the local economy. The best example I can think of is in the application of Prescription 5.13 (Forest Products). The prescription is clearly geared toward the achievement of Goals like Objective 3.2 (the production of a sustainable level of goods and services), 6.2 (the effective management of market oriented programs), and 8.2 (the recognition of local economic dependence on National Forest programs and activities). Yet, the Standards and Guidelines for the Management-Area ensure that equally important objectives like 1.3 (the improvement of

watershed conditions), 2.3 (the sustainability of wildlife populations), and 2.4 (the ability of species to disperse over large areas) can be achieved as well. There is a balance.

Some of the important objectives that are based on the law and identified in the Revised Plan include:

- *Improve watershed conditions to restore favorable soil relationships and water quality (watershed rehabilitation). (Forest Objective 1.3)
- *Protect the integrity of the soil and water resources by discouraging motorized- vehicle use in wetlands, wet meadows, and riparian areas. (Forest Objective 1.6)
- *Emphasize the function of natural processes with little or no human influence in designated Wildernesses and in areas categorized as Backcountry, Wild Rivers, and Research Natural Areas. (Forest Objective 2.1)
- *Ensure the sustainability of viable populations of all native wildlife species through the maintenance or improvement of habitat conditions. (Forest Objective 2.3)
- *Manage wildlife habitat at the appropriate scale (e.g., local, regional, Statewide, or beyond) to maintain the ability of species to disperse over large areas. (Forest Objective 2.4)
- *Use prescribed natural fire and management-ignited fire where forest ecosystems evolved under the influence of wildfire. This includes the use of fire as a management tool. (Forest Objective 2.9)
- *Continue to emphasize the long-term sustainable production of resources for economies, communities, and people. This includes the production of timber within sustainable limits -- the softwood allowable sale quantity is 21 MMBF/year -- our anticipated harvest level based on experienced budgets is 11 MMBF/year. (Forest Objective 3.2)
- *Primarily use the existing road system. (Forest Objective 3.4)
- *Emphasize the maintenance of natural- or near-natural-appearing landscapes in all areas of the forest, and to increase access to a range of recreation opportunities in attractive settings. (Forest Objective 4.1)
- *Emphasize interpretation, information, and environmental education as important parts of outdoor recreation. (Forest Objective 4.6)

*Emphasize the effective management of the Forest's market-oriented programs (timber, range, minerals, and special uses, so that they are financially profitable). (Forest Objective 6.2)

*Emphasize the spirit of cooperation with all people, including those whose livelihood is dependent on National Forest resources, in the development of plans and projects. (Forest Objective 7.1)

*Continue to recognize the nature and extent of local economic dependencies on National Forest activities. Give special attention to resource programs that help diversify rural economies. (Forest Objective 8.2)

*Emphasize high-quality customer service. (Forest Objective)

*Emphasize and give priority to an ongoing comprehensive monitoring and evaluation effort to ensure compliance with the Forest Plan. (Forest Objective)

All of the Goals and Objectives listed in Chapter II of the Revised Land and Resource Management Plan are important, and the achievement of them is emphasized in the implementation of this Forest Plan. The land allocations in Alternative G are structured toward the achievement of these Goals. The Goals that I have listed here characterize the intent of this Plan and offer a focus for the future. These Goals depict an attitude that I am confident will continue over the next 10 - 15 years. Our focus is on outcomes, rather than outputs. We will take credit for what is produced and we will accept responsibility for the condition of the land when projects are completed. "Ecosystem management" is not a buzzword...it is a way of doing business, an attitude toward the land and the people we serve. It is not dependant on funding, but on our focus on the accomplishment of these goals.

Decision 2. The Establishment of Forestwide Management Requirements (Forestwide Standards and Guidelines).

There are some changes in the Standards and Guidelines, particularly the Forestwide Standards and Guidelines. These are listed in Chapter III of the Revised Plan, and are required by the resource integration requirements of 36 CFR 219.13 through 219.26; and 219.27.

I need to emphasize one important point. Our objective is to simplify the content of the Forest Plan. Toward that end, I have directed the Forest not to reprint all of the laws, policies, Manual and Handbook direction. These rules still apply, and I direct you to Appendices A through E in the Forest Plan for a list of them.

The rationale used for the Goals and Objectives applies to the establishment of Standards and Guidelines as well. The Standards and Guidelines apply across the range of alternatives. I am selecting Alternative G based on the balance between the production of goods and services and ecological sustainability that is achieved through the combination of Goals and Objectives, Standards and Guidelines, and Management-Area Prescriptions. The Standards and Guidelines will be monitored to ensure that they are working.

Some of the important changes in the Forestwide Standards and Guidelines are:

- *We have selected the Standards and the Design criteria for soil and water that are to be included in the *Regional Watershed Conservation Practices Handbook*.
- *The Forest Plan Revision included an Oil and Gas Leasing analysis. Several resource Stipulations will apply to development on all administratively available and authorized lands, unless a more restrictive Stipulation is required in the Management-Area Prescription. These Stipulations include "No Surface Occupancy-(NSO)," and "Controlled Surface Use-(CSU)."
- *Soils guidelines include direction for the retention of fine slash, to ensure soil productivity for the future.
- *The construction of permanent and temporary roads is limited.
- *Road and trail construction (in some cases reconstruction) will be located away from streams and wet areas, to protect important riparian habitat and water quality.
- *Several Standards apply specifically to the management of riparian areas and wetlands. The Standards apply to vegetation management, the design and construction of stream crossings, stream channel pattern, natural ground cover, soil structure, water budget, drainage patterns, instream flows, negotiated agreements with water users, and the operation of water-use facilities.
- *We have identified Standards that are designed to protect the biological diversity of the Forest for the future. These include management direction for the retention of coarse woody debris, the inventory and assessment of old growth during project planning, aspen management, and the use of spatial-analysis concepts in project planning.
- *We have opted to use the Clary and Webster Range Standards and Guidelines until specific management requirements are identified in Allotment Management Plans.

- *We have included the direction for the use of even-aged, two-aged, or uneven-aged silvicultural prescriptions, restocking levels by species, use of artificial-regeneration methods, and opening Guidelines for timber management.
- *Standards and Guidelines are adopted for the management of wildlife in all areas of the Forest. Some of these include cover for ground-nesting birds, bat habitat, the protection of active and inactive raptor nests, protection of Threatened and Endangered Species, measures to prevent new additions to the Threatened and Endangered Species list, bald eagle sites, and, most important, the protection of habitat for existing species over the entire Forest.
- *Standards and Guidelines have been adopted for the management of noxious weeds, insect and disease management, and fire.
- *Forestwide Standards and Guidelines are adopted for the management of developed and dispersed recreation. Particular emphasis is placed on the monitoring of recreation use all year, and the need to modify use if necessary.
- *Specific Standards and Guidelines are adopted to protect Wilderness resources.
- *Specific Standards and Guidelines are adopted to ensure the protection of scenic resources.
- * Several Standards and Guidelines have been adopted for travel management, including limiting motorized use to designated roads and trails, direction to pursue the closure of roads causing resource damage, and road and trail construction or maintenance.

These are a few of the Forestwide Standards and Guidelines that foster the intent of this Forest Plan and what we expect to accomplish with it. All of these Standards and Guidelines will be carefully monitored to ensure that they are working, or to identify those that merit change. The Standards and Guidelines are the direction for management and serve to illustrate the intent of the Plan. The Standards and Guidelines leave the latitude to accomplish Forest objectives where it should be...in the hands of those who work for the Forest and with the public to design and administer projects as the plan is implemented.

Decision 3.Establishment of Management Area Direction (Management- Area Prescriptions and associated Standards and Guidelines) for 17 Management Areas.

The Forest will use 17 Management-Area Prescriptions to implement the Forest Plan. These are listed in Chapter IV of the Revised Forest Plan. This direction will guide future management activities within each specific management area, and is required by 36 CFR 219.11(c).

The application of the Management-Area Prescriptions is where the alternatives vary the most. The mix of prescriptions and how they are applied is a key factor in my decision. Here is how the alternatives compare and the rationale for choosing Alternative G.

Alternative NA is an expression of past management. Land allocations in this Alternative clearly emphasize the production of goods and services and subordinate other resource values. The Alternative does little to resolve the Revision Topics outside of Timber Management and Suitability.

Alternatives A and F are similar in that they stress the importance of biological systems over human needs. Alternative A would result in the majority of the Forest being designated or recommended for Wilderness. Timber harvest would occur but would be the result of other resource management objectives since there are no suitable lands nor programmed Allowable Sale Quantity. Alternative F is based on the theory of "island biogeography" and employs a combination of Standards and Guidelines and Management-Area Prescriptions that achieve that emphasis. Land suitable and scheduled for timber management would be limited. Both alternatives manage the majority of the Forest either as Wilderness or managed in a way very similar to Wilderness. Recreation in both alternatives heavily favors nonmotorized uses. Oil and Gas is either not allowed (Alternative A) or minimized (Alternative F).

Alternatives B and D favor resource production. We anticipate that this can be accomplished within the biological capability of the Forest. These alternatives emphasize sustainable production on a greater area of the Forest. Both alternatives would require the development of several unroaded areas causing a fundamental change in the unique (undeveloped) character of the land. Neither alternative recommends additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Both alternatives feature multi-season, multi-use recreation programs which include the maintenance or expansion of existing developed recreation sites. Both alternatives will emphasize motorized recreation opportunities but Alternative D will increase the availability of nonmotorized opportunities outside of Wilderness. Both alternatives include Backcountry Motorized or Backcountry Nonmotorized Management Prescriptions. The comments received on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement indicate that these allocations do little to resolve recreation issues. Indeed, they appear to cause more problems than they solve.

Alternative E continues to get at a balance of uses with the Management-Areas employed. Biological diversity is protected due to the limitation of development to areas already under management. Suitable timber lands consist of previously harvested areas and areas outside of inventoried unroaded areas. The Alternative includes the recommendation of selected unroaded areas for Wilderness designation. The remainder of the areas will be managed to offer Backcountry Motorized or Backcountry Nonmotorized recreation opportunities. These

prescriptions are the same as those used in alternatives B and D and I have the same reservations about them. Oil and Gas leasing would be limited to lands that do not have high recreation values outside of Wilderness.

I chose the mix of Management-Area Prescriptions in Alternative G. Biological diversity will be protected across the Forest as a whole. Much of the Forest outside of Wilderness will remain undeveloped. There are no recommendations for Wilderness designation. Timber management will occur on suitable lands that consist of previously harvested areas and portions of the unroaded areas. The harvest level that we anticipate (based on experienced budgets) and the ASQ assures resource protection, and can be done in way that is aesthetically pleasing.

The Alternative has one very important distinction. The unroaded areas will be managed using Backcountry Prescription 3.3. This prescription is different than those used in the other alternatives because it does not segregate users to one area of the Forest or another. Instead, we will manage the trails in the Backcountry areas for either motorized or nonmotorized uses. In this way, the Forest is available to a variety of people. Oil and Gas Leasing opportunities are available where it makes sense to offer them. That is, on the areas of the Forest (generally outside Wilderness and Backcountry) where a high potential exists.

With regard to biological diversity and the approach taken in Alternative G, I need to make one point. Alternative G is a refinement of alternatives E and D. Most of the unroaded areas are allocated to Backcountry so that biological systems are protected there as well as in other parts of the Forest. The Alternative features the "species dispersal concept" for the protection of biological diversity as opposed to the "island biogeography concept" featured in Alternative F. Our analysis does not demonstrate the validity on one concept over the other; rather, it demonstrates the applicability of one over the other. Simply stated, the "island biogeography" approach seems more applicable to the Forests in the Northwest or the East. The vegetation in the ecosystems in which the Rio Grande National Forest is located is more naturally fragmented, and so, more amenable to the "species dispersal" approach. This way animals will have connective corridors to other areas in the region and the habitat and hiding cover on the rest of the Forest that will allow animals to travel to and utilize these corridors. Our analysis also supports the conclusion that recreation uses can be managed so that they are compatible with the protection of biological diversity. We do intend to carefully monitor these uses.

The Management-Area Prescriptions used in Alternative G include:

Category 1 -

There are 430,820 (approximately 22% of the Forest), included in these prescriptions in Alternative G. This category includes Management-Area Prescriptions for Wilderness and eligible Wild Rivers.

Wilderness - Pristine: These are areas managed to protect and perpetuate their essentially pristine conditions. Natural processes and conditions are not measurably affected by human use. Recreation opportunities that offer solitude and require a great deal of self-reliance are found in these areas of the Wilderness.

Wilderness - Primitive: These are areas managed to protect ecological conditions. Recreation opportunities that offer a moderate degree of solitude but require a great deal of self-reliance are offered in these areas of the Wilderness.

Wilderness - Semi-Primitive: These are areas managed to protect natural conditions and give access to other segments of the Wilderness. Encounters with other users should be expected, and people should expect to see some evidence of human activity.

It is important that people realize that Wildernesses are managed to protect what they are - Wilderness - first. Wilderness areas are designated by Congress and are managed to retain their natural influences without improvements or human habitation, and to preserve their natural character.

Recreation is an activity that is allowed, but is not the purpose for which Wildernesses were designated. Therefore controls on activities are more evident, and restrictions on levels of use may come to bear as use increases over time.

No areas are recommended for Wilderness designation in Alternative G. This decision is based on the conclusions of the Wilderness Needs Assessment that is in Chapter III of the Final Environmental Impact Statement, Wilderness section. Lands managed under these prescriptions are not included in the suitable-timber land base. The Needs Assessment supports the conclusion that the existing Wildernesses on the Forest have the capacity to sustain more use. These areas also offer a broad ecological representation of the ecosystems and vegetative types on the Forest.

Designated and Eligible Wild Rivers: These are managed to protect and perpetuate eligible river segments. These river segments may or may not be located within designated Wilderness.

The Forest has identified 14 rivers or streams that have been identified as eligible for Wild and Scenic designation. My decision is to manage these rivers or streams under a Wild and Scenic River Management Prescription until such time as a suitability analysis is done. At that time the

river segment will either be recommended to Congress for designation or it will be managed under the Prescriptions of the lands adjacent to the area. Please note that eligibility will not affect the existing negotiated agreements with local water users.

Category 2 -

There are 11,870 acres (about 1% of the Forest) included in these prescriptions. This category includes the Prescription for the management of Research Natural Areas. I am selecting six individual areas for designation as Research Natural Areas in Alternative G. These are described in the Research Natural Area section of FEIS, chapter 3. These areas are representative of a range of vegetation types and topographic features that have not been heavily influenced by humans. Timber harvest is prohibited in these areas and there are some restrictions to livestock grazing. The Forest will not do any development within these areas and recreation use will continue with few restrictions. These areas are not included in the suitable timber land base.

Research Natural Areas: These are areas managed to protect or enhance exemplary ecosystems designated for non-manipulative research, education, and maintenance of biodiversity.

I am approving the designation of six RNAs in Alternative G. These areas and the educational and research opportunities they offer are an important factor in my decision. We dropped one proposed area based on the high level of public concern. The remaining six areas, combined with other Research Natural Areas in the Region, ensure that research and education opportunities will be available in the future.

Category 3 -

There are 500,070 acres (approximately 25% of the Forest) included in these Prescriptions. These Prescriptions include Special Interest Areas, Backcountry, and eligible Scenic Rivers. My decision to select Alternative G is based on the inclusion of these areas and the role they play in the realization of Objectives and Desired Conditions for the Forest.

Special Interest Areas - These areas are managed to protect or enhance areas of unusual characteristics. For example, the John Fremont Special Area includes the remnants of the campsites used by the Fremont Expedition. This Prescription protects those sites for future generations. These areas are not included in the suitable-timber land base.

There are seven Special Interest Areas designated in Alternative G. These areas have unusual plant, geologic, or historical characteristics and will play a significant role in the future of the forest.

Backcountry - This Prescription represents the greatest change from the 1985 Forest Plan. It offers resolution of all five revision topics and is a key factor in my decision to select Alternative G. There are some important facets concerning the use of this Prescription.

For instance, the Backcountry Prescription protects important biological components of the Forest that so many people are concerned about. Since almost all of the Unroaded Areas on the Forest are included in Backcountry, these areas will help satisfy concerns for the preservation of biological reserves. We are confident that these areas can be managed to protect their biological values and at the same time offer backcountry opportunities to the public.

By using this Prescription, options will remain open if additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System are needed in the future. We heard loud and clear from many people that there has been enough development on the Rio Grande.

Backcountry areas are not included in the suitable-timber land base. Timber harvest for any reason (including salvage from fire, insects and disease, or other natural disturbances) is not allowed. These areas will remain undeveloped.

The use of the Backcountry Prescription has some important ramifications for recreation and travel management. Backcountry recreation experiences are in demand, and the use of this Prescription will allow us to satisfy the demand and still protect the integrity of the area.

*First of all, we are not segregating users, as we did in the other alternatives. Based on the comments we received, segregating use areas appears to cause more problems than it solves. Instead, the Backcountry Prescription allows all users to access the area. Some trails that have been open to motorized uses will be limited to nonmotorized access as per the Record of Decision issued for Travel Management. The trails that are open to motorized uses are highlighted on the map of Alternative G. The specific trails in the Backcountry and the criteria for non-motorized designation are listed in the Recreation section of the Final Environmental Impact Statement.

*Another facet of the decision includes the modification of the All-Terrain-Vehicle game retrieval policy. In the Backcountry, All-Terrain-Vehicles and other trail vehicles are limited to designated trails only. Motorized cross-country travel is not allowed in the Backcountry for All-Terrain-Vehicle game retrieval.

*People are concerned about the use of snowmobiles in the Backcountry. My staff reviewed the literature that was submitted pertaining to snowmobile use, and found nothing that would lead to the conclusion that any additional restrictions to those already in place are needed. In reality, snowmobile use occurs in only a few areas (roads and packed trails, for the most part) and the terrain in the Backcountry offers better restrictions than any we might choose to apply. Snowmobile use in the Backcountry will be monitored, and restrictions applied if the need arises.

*Oil and gas leasing is limited to the areas with high potential for oil and gas resource development (with a No-Surface Occupancy Stipulation). All other areas in the Backcountry are not authorized for lease. We've chosen this option so that the unroaded character of the area is protected.

The selection of Alternative G and the use of this Prescription maintains the Rio Grande's most visible attribute - its undeveloped areas - and maintain management options in these areas for the future.

Eligible Scenic Rivers - These areas are managed to protect river segments that are eligible for Wild and Scenic River designation. These areas are not part of the land base suitable for timber management. Current water-use and stream-protection agreements with local water users will continue.

Category 4 -

There are 109,140 acres (about 6% of the Forest) included in this category in Alternative G. These Prescriptions are an asset to the Alternative and another important factor in my decision. These are lands where ecological processes are managed to be compatible with recreation use. These areas are the scenic backdrop for the nation's number-one recreation activity: driving for pleasure and viewing scenery. Prescriptions in this category include:

Scenic Byways or Railroads - These areas are managed to protect or preserve the scenic and recreation values and uses on lands adjacent to Scenic Byways and Railroads.

Management, including livestock grazing and timber harvest, will occur as these areas are included in the suitable-timber land base. These activities will be designed so that they resemble naturally occurring patterns or disturbances in the landscape. These areas are the most "seen" on the Forest, and are a key feature of Alternative G.

Dispersed and Developed Recreation - These areas are another important component in the Forest recreation program in Alternative G. These lands are managed with emphasis on a wide

range of settings that are appropriate for a variety of recreation opportunities within different landscapes.

These areas are included in the suitable-timber land base. Activities will be designed to resemble naturally occurring patterns or disturbances in the landscape. Most of the Forest's developed recreation sites are located within these areas, and are a destination for visitors from all over the United States.

Eligible Recreation Rivers - These areas are managed to protect eligible Recreation River segments. These lands are not part of the suitable-timber land base. Current water-use and stream-protection agreements made through negotiation with local water users will continue.

Category 5 -

These are areas managed to produce a mix of forage, forest products, and wildlife habitat, while maintaining scenic resources and offering recreation opportunities. There are 727,590 acres (approximately 37% of the Forest) included in these Management Areas². Prescription in this category include:

General Forest and Intermingled Rangelands - These are areas of the Forest where a variety of management options are allowed. These include livestock grazing, wildlife habitat improvement, dispersed recreation, and timber harvest.

One of the key features of this Prescription is that we have the option to manage for resource production while ensuring that there is sufficient habitat in key locations that allows animals to move about the Forest and adjacent areas as they need to.

These areas are included in the suitable-timber land base. Timber management is allowed but it is not emphasized in these areas.

Forest Products - The intent of this Prescription is to allow a full range of activities, with an emphasis on the production of commercial wood products.

These areas will emphasize the production of commercial wood products. This Prescription is used on areas of the forest where it makes sense to apply the Prescription. It will be evident that we are managing for timber products in these areas however, we will still maintain, at least, the

² Timber harvesting is allowed in various Category 4 and 5 prescriptions. Timber harvesting (suitable and scheduled timberlands) will only occur on 291,320 acres in Alternative G. This is a much smaller amount of land than are in all Category 4 and 5 lands combined.

minimum habitat and cover requirements that allow animals to move around the forest as they need to.

These areas are included in the suitable-timber land base.

These areas and the timber they produce are a key component of my decision. Several factors came into play. First of all, resource protection measures are in place. Harvest will be planned using the spatial-analysis guidelines developed by Forest Staff. Composition, structure, and function of Forest vegetation will figure in all plans and decisions. At least the minimum habitat for wildlife will be maintained, so animals can move around as they need to: within the Forest and beyond. Old growth will be inventoried and assessed so that its role can be determined.

Deer and Elk Winter Range - These areas are managed to provide adequate amounts of quality forage, cover, and solitude for deer, elk, and other species while on winter range. These areas are included (with precautions) in the suitable-timber land base. The use of snowmobiles is restricted to designated roads and trails within these areas.

These areas are a key feature of Alternative G because they protect the habitat that is critical for wildlife in the winter.

Special Wildlife Areas - Bighorn Sheep - These areas are habitat for established bighorn sheep herds on the Forest. These lands are not included in the suitable-timber land base.

Category 6 -

These areas are managed to produce forage for livestock, wildlife, and/or recreational stock. There are 76,090 acres (about 4% of the Forest) in this category. Livestock grazing is permitted in all Prescriptions. The Prescription in this category is:

General Rangelands - These areas are managed to produce forage for livestock, wildlife, and/or recreational stock. It is important to note that these are not the only areas where livestock grazing is allowed.

These areas are the true rangeland on the Forest and it makes sense to apply this Prescription. These lands are not included in the suitable-timber land base.

Category 7 -

This category and its group of prescriptions was not used on the Rio Grande National Forest.

Category 8 -

These are areas where the ecological conditions and natural processes are likely to be permanently altered by human activities, beyond the level needed to maintain natural-appearing landscapes. There are 1,180 acres (approximately 0.1% of the Forest) in this prescription. The Prescription in this category is:

Ski-Based Resorts, Existing/Potential - These areas are managed for their existing or potential use as ski-based resort sites. These areas are not part of the suitable-timber land base.

The Prescription applies to the Wolf Creek Ski Area, including locations where expansion may occur. I am not approving any expansion, since additional Environmental Analysis will be required before that decision can be made. It does make sense to include the area where expansion might occur in this plan.

These Management-Area Prescriptions are selected for the implementation of this Plan. The mix of Management Prescriptions and the options and opportunities they offer is a key factor in my decision to select Alternative G. The mix of Prescriptions very effectively address the five Revision Topics, protects biological diversity, offers the opportunity for the realization of user expectations, protects wildlife habitat for all species, and ensures the existence of a healthy Forest for future generations. In short, Alternative G responds to what people told us they want. Indeed, the Alternative was originally developed from the themes that the public work groups gave us earlier in the process. The Alternative makes sense.

Decision 4. The designation of suitable timber land and establishment of the allowable sale quantity (ASQ). Designation of lands suitable for grazing and browsing. The identification of lands suitable and available for Oil and Gas Leasing. Provision for a broad spectrum of forest and rangeland related outdoor recreation opportunities.

Tables displaying the suitable land base are in the FEIS and meet the requirements of 36 CFR 219.14, 219.16, 219.20, and 219.21.

The role that the Rio Grande National Forest plays in the local timber industry is a controversial and highly polarized subject. This is one aspect of the overall decision that I have truly agonized over. We read the letters that the mill workers sent in during the comment period and we took them to heart. Here is how the alternatives compare.

Alternative NA is the current (1985) management Alternative. The previous plan and its associated timber outputs have proven unrealistic. Experienced budgets have not been to the

level of the plan's expected budget and consequently contributed to the difficulty in producing a reliable level of timber harvest in recent years. The problem has been compounded by the need to balance the Forests budget between the various resource programs.

Alternatives A and F produce the lowest levels of timber harvest. Lands suitable for timber production are limited (Alternative F) or are not identified (Alternative A). Availability of, and accessibility to, other wood products is limited in each alternative.

Alternatives B and D produce the highest level of harvest. The alternatives do not fully resolve the concerns expressed in the other revision topics. Both of these alternatives sacrifice much of the undeveloped nature of the Forest. A better balance is needed.

Alternative E makes a good start at achieving the balance. Suitable lands consist of those previously harvested and areas outside of inventoried unroaded areas. The Alternative still leaves some important facets of timber management and suitability unresolved.

I believe Alternative G offers the balance we are seeking. A letter from the local County Commissioners in the San Luis Valley was brought to my attention. In the letter the Commissioners expressed concern over the future of the timber industry in the San Luis Valley and asked that we select an alternative that assures a sustainable level of harvest but one that accomplishes harvest in an environmentally sound and aesthetically pleasing way. Alternative G addresses that concern. We were asked (by industry) to analyze the potential of aspen for the local market. Alternative G includes aspen as a separate component of the Allowable Sale Quantity. Local concerns over the availability of firewood, posts and poles, and other forest products are addressed in the Alternative.

My decision in approving this Plan (Alternative G) and the suitable timberlands in it takes into account the needs of people, the importance of biological diversity, the ability of the Forest to produce a sustainable level of harvest, and the balance between all of these factors. The timber industry helps diversify the local and regional economy in and around the San Luis Valley. On the other hand, we heard from many people who feel that we have no business harvesting timber on this National Forest. My message is clear - we will continue to produce timber, within limits, on the Rio Grande National Forest. My decision presents some challenges to industry. The old saying is that challenges offer opportunity. I am confident that we can continue to work with industry to overcome these challenges, take advantage of the opportunities they present, and achieve mutual goals within the framework of this plan.

There are 291,325 acres of land suitable and scheduled for timber management. The Allowable Sale Quantity is 51,800 Thousand Cubic Feet per decade (210 Million Board Feet). The Allowable Sale Quantity for Aspen is 11,190 Thousand Cubic Feet per decade (18 Million Board

Feet). Under the full budget level, the annual average Allowable Sale Quantity is 21 Million Board Feet per year for softwoods and 1.8 Million Board Feet per year for aspen. The ASQ levels for softwoods and aspen are Noninterchangeable Components (NIC). This represents the upper end of the range the Forest is capable of harvesting. Based on experienced budgets, the Forest expects to sell 11 Million Board Feet per year of softwoods. Unless additional funding is included, Aspen will not be sold under the experienced budget.

The harvest level is sustainable, and it is within the limits that the Forest can supply under the framework of Alternative G. I realize my decision presents challenges for the timber industry, but I am confident that we can assure a steady supply of at least 11 Million Board Feet annually, based on experienced budgets. The alternative also offers some important opportunities. For example, we were asked to supply aspen for the market. We have included aspen as a separate component of the Allowable Sale Quantity.

Another extremely important facet of this Forest Plan Revision is livestock grazing. This is a controversial subject that runs the gamut between no domestic livestock on the National Forest to the debate of the needs of ranchers and the level of grazing on National Forest lands. Livestock grazing will continue on the Rio Grande National Forest. We have placed emphasis on effective management of grazing allotments. We will use the Clary and Webster guidelines until the individual Allotment Management Plans are in place. The Standards and Guidelines in Alternative G will improve the unsatisfactory conditions on rangelands, maintain the quality of those in satisfactory condition and protect the Forest's fragile riparian areas and wetlands.

Alternative G has 576,995 acres of suitable rangelands. These rangelands can meet the needs of livestock permittees. Grazing will continue to be a valued use of resources on the Rio Grande National Forest. The amount of suitable rangelands in Alternative G is slightly lower than Alternative NA, but should accommodate livestock needs while maintaining healthy herds of elk, deer and bighorn sheep.

There will be 61% of the Forest available for oil and gas leasing in Alternative G. The available and authorized land is located on areas of the Forest where Oil and Gas potential is high. Keep in mind, that even under the high development scenario, only 220 acres of development is anticipated. Resource development can occur with standard lease terms and resource protection stipulations as necessary.

Decision 5. The establishment of requirements for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the Revised Plan to meet the requirements of 36 CFR 219.11 (d).

Another key factor in my selection of Alternative G is that a monitoring plan be in place that will ensure that this plan is working over time. Forest Staff have developed a Monitoring Plan that identifies the minimum requirements for monitoring that is legally required. The Plan also identifies the minimum requirements for monitoring that is not legally required, but is important. Most of these items have been identified based on concerns expressed by the public.

This Plan is a contract with the public to ensure that the Forest is healthy and will continue to be. The Monitoring Plan is our commitment to fulfill the terms of that contract. I have placed emphasis on monitoring, and I am confident that the Forest will comply with the requirements (legal and otherwise) of the Plan. The Monitoring Plan requirements are in Chapter V of the Revised Plan.

Decision 6. Documentation that We Will Not Recommend Any Further Additions to the Wilderness Preservation System.

One of the reasons why I am selecting Alternative G for implementation is that it has no recommendations for additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System. The basis for my decision is the conclusions presented in the Wilderness Needs Assessment in Chapter III of the Final Environmental Impact Statement. Disclosure of this decision is consistent with the requirements of 36 CFR 219.17.

I know that many people feel that Wilderness designation offers the highest level of protection for unroaded areas, and that they will be disappointed with this decision. While this may be true, there are other factors to consider. For instance, nearly a quarter (430,300 acres) of the Rio Grande National Forest is already designated Wilderness. These Wildernesses are ecologically well represented at the Province level. There is a demand for Backcountry recreation experiences and we have more options available to satisfy that demand in a non-Wilderness setting. Future options are still available. Almost all of the Unroaded Areas on the Rio Grande National Forest have been allocated to Backcountry Prescriptions. The Backcountry Prescription protects the wild characteristics of the unroaded areas. If needed, they can be recommended as Wilderness in the future. Finally, a lot of the people we talked to (locally and regionally) do not want anymore Wilderness. They do not want these areas developed, either, but for the most part they see Wilderness as a magnet that attracts people where a Backcountry Prescription does not.

One final point regarding the inventory of the unroaded areas. We have updated our roadless inventory in this Forest Plan Revision. This information is included in Chapter 3 of the FEIS and in Appendix B of the FEIS. The updated inventory takes the place of the RARE II inventory. RARE II was an effort to plan a single resource prior to integrated Forest planning. The updated inventory includes newly developed planning requirements which are much better than those

from the RARE II era. This inventory will be used for all related Forest Plan Implementation activities and is the official Rio Grande National Forest unroaded inventory.

BENEFITS, COSTS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

Issues, concerns and comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Proposed Revised Plan received particular consideration in the decision-making process. The environmental consequences of the Revised Plan and the other alternatives have been studied thoroughly. Alternatives are described and compared in Chapter II of the FEIS. Environmental consequences are discussed in Chapter III.

Financial and economic analysis was also performed on each alternative. I am pleased that Alternative G has the highest economic Present Net Value (PNV). While other alternatives ranked very close, especially Alternatives B and D, Alternative G will provide the highest PNV for the American public. Other items considered include benefit/cost and revenue/cost ratios, income to the US Treasury, funds sent to counties, and job and income impacts.

FACTORS CONSIDERED IN THIS DECISION

In the course of making the aforementioned six individual decisions in the Forest Plan, I considered numerous factors, in effect making many decisions within decisions. Some of these factors included:

- *The applicable laws, policies, Manual, and Handbook direction that govern the development of a Forest Plan and the management of National Forest lands.
- *Protection of the basic resources (air, soil, and water).
- *The people who use the National Forests, and the communities they live in, as well as the relationship of the Forest Service with people and communities.
- *Economics and the role the Rio Grande National Forest plays in local, regional, and national economies.
- *The "science." There are many facets to consider here. The science refers to the biological science as it applies to the management of National Forests. Since people are an integral part of ecosystems and this Plan, the subject also covers the application of social science. Neither of the sciences are perfect.
- *The role of the Rio Grande National Forest in the greater San Juan ecosystem.

- *Biological processes including the protection of Threatened, Endangered, or Sensitive plant and animal Species, natural processes, the importance of riparian areas, old growth, human activities and how they influence ecosystems, habitat capability, connectivity, fragmentation, and hiding cover.
- *The role of fire in ecosystem dynamics.
- *Access to the Forest and to the facilities available to the public.
- *Negotiated water agreements.
- *The plans and policies of other government agencies (local, state, and national).
- *Adequate representation of Forest areas in the Wilderness Preservation System.
- *Motorized and nonmotorized use of the Backcountry and other areas of the Forest.
- *The effects of recreation on ecosystems.
- *The literature review and the results of it in the analysis of the alternatives._
- *The coarse- and fine-filter analysis done at both the eco-section and province level.
- *The determination of Outfitter-Guide Capacities for the Forest.

I considered all of these factors and more in the decision-making process. The alternatives considered were developed and analyzed based on these factors.

THE PURPOSE AND NEED AND REVISION TOPICS

The National Forest Management Act (NFMA) require that Forest Plans be revised every 10 years and that the Forest Service explain why the revision needs to be done. The Purpose of, and Need for, the Forest Plan Revision are fully explained in Chapter I of the Final Environmental Impact Statement.

The issues addressed in the Forest Plan are identified by Revision Topic. Revision topics are generally thought of as subjects for which resource conditions, technical knowledge, or public perception of resource management have created a "need for change." The Revision Topics

constitute the identification of significant issues, as required by law. The Revision Topics addressed in this Plan are:

- *Biological Diversity
- *Wilderness, Unroaded Areas and Other Special-Area Considerations
- *Timber Management and Suitability
- *Recreation and Travel Management
- *Oil and Gas Leasing

The Revision Topics are fully described in Chapter I of the Final Environmental Impact Statement.

CHANGES BETWEEN DRAFT AND FINAL

We made several changes between the publication of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement and the publication of the Final documents. These changes include:

- *The development of a new alternative (Alternative G) as a logical outgrowth of public input and comments.
- *The update of the Rocky Mountain Resource Information System (RMRIS) database.
- *The conversion of the Geographic Information System (GIS) from Map Overlay Statistical System (MOSS) to ARC.
- *The recalculation of acreages based on the use of ARC GIS.
- *The addition of irregular shelterwood to the menu of silvicultural prescriptions modeled.
- *The incorporation of the connected-disturbance analysis done for watersheds.
- *We reran FORPLAN and benchmarks, and performed additional sensitivity analysis.
- *Aspen was added as a noninterchangeable component (NIC) of the Allowable Sale Quantity.
- *We developed the Backcountry Prescription for use in Alternative G.
- *We designated trails in the Backcountry as motorized and non motorized in Alternative G, in compliance with the Travel Management ROD issued separately.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

Following is a brief description of the alternatives considered in this analysis. Before describing them, I would like to make some important points concerning the alternatives.

- *The strength of the alternatives and of this planning process is that the alternatives express a range of concerns and issues raised by the public. The range is not based on predetermined outputs. Any similarity in the numbers between alternatives is purely coincidental.
- *All alternatives include the concepts of multiple-use management and incorporate the philosophy of ecosystem management. All alternatives share a set of basic Goals and Standards and Guidelines which insure protection of Forest resources and compliance with applicable laws.
- *All alternatives (including the current management alternative) use a new numbering scheme for Management Areas that is consistent with other Forests in the Rocky Mountain Region and surrounding Regions.
- *All alternatives meet the management requirements of 36 CFR 219.17, as well as all other legal and regulatory requirements.

OBJECTIVES SHARED BY ALL ALTERNATIVES

All alternatives will meet the objectives established in the *Rocky Mountain Regional Guide*. These include:

- *Protect the basic soil, air, and water resources.
- *Provide for multiple uses and sustainability in an environmentally acceptable manner.
- *Provide for a variety of life through management of ecosystems.
- *Provide for scenic quality and a range of recreation opportunities that respond to our customers and local communities.
- *Emphasize cooperation with individuals, organizations, and other agencies in coordination of planning and project implementation.
- *Promote rural-development opportunities.

*In cooperation with other landowners, strive for improved landownership and access patterns, to the mutual benefit of both public and private landowners.

*Improve the financial efficiency of all programs and projects.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A

This Alternative represents a "light touch" approach to forest management. Wilderness and nonmotorized recreation would be emphasized. There would be no suitable timberland and any logging would be the result of other resource program objectives.

This is how Alternative A responds to the Revision Topics:

Biological Diversity: The intent of this Alternative is to allow ecological processes such as fire, insects, disease, and other processes to occur with little or no influence from humans. We anticipate that species viability will be maintained.

Wilderness, Unroaded Areas, and Other Special-Area Considerations: All unroaded areas 5,000 acres and greater would be recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. All undeveloped areas between 500 and 5,000 acres would remain undeveloped. There are seven Research Natural Areas recommended for designation and 14 Wild, Scenic, or Recreation Rivers proposed.

Timber Suitability and Management: There will be no lands designated Suitable for timber management, or scheduled for harvest. There will be no Allowable Sale Quantity identified with this Alternative. Timber harvest may be used to meet other resource management objectives.

Recreation and Travel Management: Management emphasis will be on nonmotorized recreation within those areas proposed for Wilderness designation. Travel management emphasis will be on reducing the miles of road throughout the Forest that do not meet management objectives, or are causing resource damage.

Oil and Gas Leasing: All existing and recommended Wilderness would be unavailable for leasing. The remaining lands would be closed to leasing by management direction.

Alternative B

This Alternative represents an emphasis on management to ensure economic stability using higher levels of timber harvest and the perpetuation of other programs that provide monetary returns at the local and national level.

This is how Alternative B responds to the Revision Topics:

Biological Diversity: A sustainable flow of products, services, and ecosystem values that are socially acceptable, economically viable, and within the biological capability of the resources will be provided. We anticipate that species viability will be maintained.

Wilderness, Unroaded Areas, and Other Special-Area Considerations: There are no recommendations for Wilderness designation in this alternative. Unroaded areas with high potential for timber production and oil and gas leasing will be scheduled or made available for development. All other areas would be managed for Backcountry motorized or nonmotorized recreation. There are seven Research Natural Areas recommended for designation and 14 Wild, Scenic, or Recreation Rivers proposed.

Timber Suitability and Management: Timber management will emphasize sustainable production from the Suitable land base within the natural range of variability. Management prescriptions emphasizing the production of Forest products will be used.

Recreation and Travel Management: Recreation management will emphasize multi-season multi-use programs. Travel management will emphasize closure of roads that cause resource damage.

Oil and Gas Leasing: All lands outside Wilderness will be available and authorized for oil and gas leasing. Two approaches were analyzed. The first would lease lands with standard lease terms only. The second would lease lands using standard lease terms plus resource protection Stipulations where needed.

Alternative D

This Alternative represents a blend of land management allocations that reflect people's concerns for biological values and social needs. This Alternative provides for the sustainability of Forest resources and the viability of the local economy in and around the San Luis Valley.

This is how Alternative D responds to the Revision Topics:

Biological Diversity: Ecological processes, diversity, and productivity will be maintained naturally or artificially where human-valued outputs are desired. Emphasis is on balancing

human uses that dominate and those that are subordinate to the natural environment. We anticipate that species viability will be maintained.

Wilderness, Unroaded Areas, and Other Special-Area Considerations: There are no recommendations for Wilderness designation. Many unroaded areas will be retained and managed to offer semi-primitive nonmotorized-and motorized-recreation opportunities. There are seven Research Natural Areas recommended for designation and 14 Wild, Scenic, or Recreation Rivers proposed.

Timber Suitability and Management: Timber would be managed on Suitable lands using a full range of even-and uneven-aged silvicultural prescriptions. Management would be designed to simulate natural disturbances of the landscape.

Recreation and Travel Management: Multi-season, multi-use opportunities are emphasized. Travel management emphasis is on reducing the miles of roads that do not meet management objectives or are causing resource damage.

Oil and Gas Leasing: Most of the legally available (Nonwilderness) lands would be administratively available and authorized for leasing.

Alternative E

This Alternative represents an emphasis on Forest management that would retain multiple resource objectives with little or no development of the Forest.

This is how Alternative E responds to the Revision Topics:

Biological Diversity: Ecological processes, diversity, and productivity will be maintained naturally or artificially where human-valued outputs are desired. Natural processes will occur with little human influence in the unroaded areas of the Forest. We anticipate that species viability will be maintained.

Wilderness, Unroaded Areas, and Other Special-Area Considerations: Selected unroaded areas will be recommended for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System. All others will be managed to provide nonmotorized and motorized backcountry recreation experiences. Seven Research Natural Areas are recommended for designation.

Timber Management and Suitability: Suitable timber lands would consist of previously harvested areas of the Forest.

Recreation and Travel Management: Recreation emphasis would be on multi-season, multi-use opportunities. Travel management emphasis would be on reducing miles of road that are causing resource damage.

Oil and Gas Leasing: Wilderness and recommended Wilderness would be legally unavailable for leasing. On the remaining lands, areas having high recreation values would generally be closed to leasing by management direction. All other lands would be administratively available and authorized for lease with standard lease terms and resource protection Stipulations as necessary.

Alternative F

This Alternative was developed by a group of local residents, working in conjunction with the Colorado Environmental Coalition. The Alternative is framed around the concept of island biogeography, which the group feels is the best way to perpetuate biological diversity.

This is how Alternative F responds to the Revision Topics:

Biological Diversity: This Alternative emphasizes preserving large tracts of land in a series of "core reserve" allocations and areas recommended for Wilderness. Connective corridors are included for wildlife dispersal between various Core Reserve areas. Ecological processes, diversity, and productivity are maintained primarily through natural means. We anticipate that species viability will be maintained.

Wilderness, Unroaded Areas, and Other Special-Area Considerations: Some unroaded areas would be proposed for Wilderness; and all other unroaded areas would remain roadless to protect biodiversity values, especially the habitat for Threatened and Endangered species. These Core Reserve areas would be managed much the same as designated Wilderness. There are seven Research Natural Areas recommended for designation.

Timber Management and Suitability: Lands suitable for timber production would be limited. There would be no allocation of lands to Management Prescription 5.13, Forest Products. Silvicultural prescriptions would be dominated by uneven-aged management.

Recreation and Travel Management: Recreation would be allowed, but not emphasized. The dispersed-recreation program would emphasize semi-primitive nonmotorized opportunities, with motorized opportunities limited to recreation travel corridors. No motorized uses would be allowed in Core Reserve areas.

Oil and Gas Leasing: Wilderness and recommended Wilderness would be legally unavailable for leasing. Areas considered important for protection of biodiversity would be closed to leasing by management direction. Only a few areas of the Forest would be available for leasing.

Alternative G (The Selected Alternative)

This Alternative was developed in response to the concerns expressed in the letters written during the comment period between the Draft and Final. It represents a blend of land management allocations that reflect people's concerns about biological values and social needs. These objectives would be accomplished with little or no additional development of the Forest.

This is how Alternative G responds to the Revision Topics:

Biological Diversity: Ecological processes, diversity, and productivity will be maintained naturally or artificially where human-valued outputs are desired. Natural processes will occur with little human influence in the unroaded areas of the Forest. We anticipate that species viability will be maintained.

Wilderness, Unroaded Areas, and Other Special-Area Considerations: There are no recommendations for Wilderness designation. The majority of the unroaded areas would be managed under the Backcountry prescription for the preservation of biological processes and for motorized and nonmotorized recreation. There are six areas recommended for Research Natural Areas. There are 14 Wild, Scenic, or Recreation Rivers proposed.

Timber Management and Suitability: Timber would be managed on Suitable lands using a full range of even-aged, two-aged, and uneven-aged silvicultural prescriptions. Management would be designed to simulate natural disturbances of the landscape.

Recreation and Travel Management: Recreation emphasis would be on multi-season, multi-use opportunities. Travel management emphasis would be on reducing miles of road that are causing resource damage.

Oil and Gas Leasing: Wilderness would be legally unavailable for leasing. On the remaining lands, areas having high recreation values would generally be closed to leasing by management direction. All other lands would be administratively available and authorized for lease, with standard lease terms and resource protection Stipulations as necessary.

Alternative NA

This is the No Action Alternative. "No Action" means that the current management allocations, activities, and management direction found in the 1985 Forest Plan (as amended) would continue. Alternative NA also reflects new data and information. Standards and Guidelines have been updated, new technology has been incorporated, the criteria for suitable timberlands have been updated and incorporated, and the additions to the Wilderness system in the 1993 Wilderness Act have been included. The Alternative features timber production, increased water yield, and the availability of livestock grazing.

This is how Alternative NA responds to the Revision Topics:

Biological Diversity: Biological Diversity became an issue after the 1985 Plan was completed. Current management direction with regard to biological diversity is weak. The 1985 Plan is focused more on the "parts" of the ecosystem than on whole ecosystems.

Wilderness, Unroaded Areas, and Other Special Area Considerations: The additions to the Wilderness system included in the 1993 Colorado Wilderness Act have been incorporated. No other Wilderness additions are proposed. The upper parts of the Conejos River will be managed to protect Wild and Scenic River characteristics that were identified in 1982. All other land allocations in the 1985 Plan apply. There are no Special Interest Areas or Research Natural Areas proposed.

Timber Suitability and Management: To meet the requirements of Judge Finesilver's 1989 Court Order, the Tentatively Suitable timber base has been reanalyzed with newer and better information, including soils data. This new analysis has decreased the Tentatively Suitable Timberlands from 870,000 acres to 765,100 acres. Updated Standards and Guidelines would apply.

Recreation and Travel Management: Management direction in the 1985 Plan would apply.

Oil and Gas Leasing: Updated Standards and Guidelines would apply, including a new set of oil and gas lease Stipulations. All lands outside of designated Wilderness would be available and authorized for leasing with stipulations.

FINDINGS REQUIRED BY OTHER LAWS

As the Regional Forester (deciding officer), I have considered the multitude of statutes governing management of the Rio Grande National Forest, and I believe that this decision represents the best possible approach to harmonizing and reconciling the current statutory duties of the Forest Service.

The RGNF Forest Plan is in compliance with the *Clean Water Act* because of the conclusions presented in Chapter III, Aquatic Resources section of the FEIS.

The RGNF Forest Plan is in compliance with the *National Historic Preservation Act* because of the conclusions presented in Chapter III, Heritage Resource section of the FEIS.

The RGNF Forest Plan is in compliance with the *Endangered Species Act* because of the conclusions presented in Chapter III, Wildlife section of the FEIS.

The RGNF Forest Plan is in compliance with the *Clean Air Standards* because of the conclusions presented in Chapter III, Air Resources section of the FEIS.

IDENTIFICATION OF THE ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERRED ALTERNATIVE

I consider Alternative E to be the environmentally preferred alternative. I have not selected this Alternative for implementation because of the reasons cited in this Record of Decision.

IMPLEMENTATION DATE

Implementation of this decision will occur seven calendar days following publication of the legal notice of the decision in the *Federal Register*.

Forest Plan Implementation

In accordance with the National Forest Management Act, Section 6 (I), "When Land Management Plans are revised, resource plans and permits, contracts, and other instruments, when necessary, shall be revised as soon as practicable. Any revision in present or future permits, contracts, and other instruments made pursuant to this section shall be subject to valid existing rights."

Recent NEPA projects were approved under the original Forest Plan. Because the Plan revision was focused on areas of change occurring since the original Plan (and by issues raised by the public) and because reliance is still placed on the original Plan and FEIS, except where changes are made in the Plan, or new information was included in the revision FEIS, the potential for "significant new information" issues involving "pre-revision" NEPA documents is reduced. We are committed to complying with the NEPA, NFMA, and other environmental laws which apply in the case of forest plans and projects. With respect to this Forest Plan Revision, we will deal with such issues as "significant new information" under NEPA and "consistency" under NFMA on a case by case basis.

ADMINISTRATIVE REVIEW OR APPEAL OPPORTUNITIES

This decision is subject to administrative review pursuant to 36 CFR 217. Any appeal of this decision must be fully consistent with 36 CFR 217.9, and be filed in duplicate with the Chief, USDA - Forest Service, 14th and Independence., S.W., 201 14th Street, Washington, DC 20250, within 90 days of the date of the published legal notice.

Any notice of appeal must include at a minimum:

- *A statement that the document is a Notice of Appeal filed pursuant to 36 CFR part 217;

- *The name, address and telephone number of the appellant;

- *Identification of the decision to which the objection is being made;

- *Identification of the document in which the decision is contained, by title and subject, date of the decision, and name and title of the Deciding Officer;

- *Identification of the specific portion of the decision to which objection is made;

- *The reasons for objection, including issues of fact, law, regulation, or policy; and, if applicable, specifically how the decision violates law, regulation, or policy; and

- *Identification of the specific changes(s) in the decision that the appellant seeks.

For questions concerning the Appeal process, contact:

USDA Forest Service
Attn: Ecosystem Management Staff (Steve Segovia)
PO Box 96090
Washington D.C. 20090-6090
(202) 205-1066

For questions concerning the Forest Plan, contact:

James B. Webb
Forest Supervisor
Rio Grande National Forest
1803 West Highway 160,
Monte Vista, Colorado 81144

CONCLUSION

I am pleased to announce this decision and bring this phase of the Forest Plan Revision to completion. As stated in the beginning of this document, I consider this Forest Plan to be a contract with the present as well as a promise to the future. What remains now is the challenge that is before all of us. That is, to work together; the public, the Forest Service, the ranchers, the environmentalists, the timber industry, and all of the others who have an interest in Forest management. Together, we need to overcome the challenges, to realize the opportunities, and achieve the Goals and Objectives of this Forest Plan.

The Revised Forest Plan is our commitment to fulfill the terms of the contract. We will commit to the philosophy of adaptive management as we work together to implement this Plan. We will carefully monitor our activities, the condition of the land as projects are completed, the products produced, and the effectiveness of the resource protection measures included in the Plan.

Most importantly, this Plan is our commitment to the future to ensure a healthy Forest for the next generations.

/s/ Elizabeth Estill

11/7/1996

ELIZABETH ESTILL

Date

Regional Forester

